

# NEWS

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## **USDA AND ILLINOIS ANNOUNCE \$250 MILLION EFFORT TO IMPROVE THE ILLINOIS RIVER**

PEORIA, Ill., March 30, 1998--Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman today announced a \$250 million federal-state initiative to improve the environmental quality of the Illinois River basin.

The initiative, called the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), will help preserve up to 100,000 acres of sensitive river basin land surrounding the middle Illinois and Peoria Lake sections of the Illinois River, and six of its tributaries.

"The Illinois River's contributions to the Nation's beauty and economy are immeasurable," said Secretary Glickman. "The river is valuable for its wildlife, recreational marinas, and as a major international shipping route for agricultural and manufactured products. CREP is a long-term, cost-effective solution to restore and preserve the river for future generations."

CREP is a revolutionary new program using state and federal resources to help solve environmental problems. The CREP combines an existing federal effort, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with state programs to provide a framework for USDA to work in partnership with states and local interests to meet state-specific environmental objectives. The program provides for voluntary agreements with farmers to convert crop land to native grasses, trees, and other vegetation, in return for rental payments and other incentives.

The Illinois project's goal is to reduce sediment and nutrient runoff in the project area through the use of conservation practices such as grass filter strips and forested stream-bank buffers. Benefits will include improving the water quality of the river and its surrounding watersheds, restoring native vegetation, and increasing populations of wildlife species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, and fish.

The federal government will provide funds up to 80 percent of the program costs, with Illinois or other non-federal sources providing the rest. The federal government will make payments to farmers for an initial 15-year agreement period. Illinois will provide bonus payments to farmers for voluntary contract extensions beyond 15 years and to farmers who grant permanent conservation easements. In addition, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is expanding current conservation practices in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to enhance CREP benefits.

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An Illinois CREP Advisory Committee, which will include non-governmental partners, will guide the state's program implementation. Illinois will prepare a proposed conservation plan for each landowner

entering the program, and an annual report summarizing the status and results of the project.

The Illinois River project marks the third CREP agreement since the program's establishment in 1996. The two other projects will contribute to the preservation and enhancement of the Minnesota River and the Chesapeake Bay.

Farmers and landowners can get more information about this program from their local USDA Service Center, Farm Service Agency, or Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

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